The Theatre of the Absurd and Indian Street Theatre: A Study with Reference to Maurice Merleau- Ponty's Phenomenological Framework

A

Synopsis

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Literature in general and theatre and theatrical experience in particular have the potential to enable one alter the mind, transform the consciousness , discover the meaning and reality of various modes of everyday life and change the structures of consciousness. The word theatre is derived from the Greek word 'theatron' which means 'a place for seeing' has always dealt with the search for the meaning of life. Theatrical experience is a participatory ritual or an act which formulates a strong interface between the actor and the spectator through spatio-temporal, corporeal processes, semiotic channels and the materiality of the stage .The space of the stage continuously generates myriad perceptions and emotions in the spectators. According to Bert O States "the real intimacy of the theatre is not the intimacy of being within its world, but of being present at its world's origination under all the constraints visible an invisible of immediate actuality."[1]

According to Mark Johnson "art is an exemplary form of experience that optimizes our sense of meaning."[2] Elucidating further he says:

> Art employs the very same meaning –making materials and processes as are found in our ordinary day to day experience of the meaning of objects, events and persons. Meaning reaches down into the depths of our ongoing bodily engagement with our environments, which are at once personal, social, interpersonal, and cultural. This meaning making goes beyond the operations of language in important ways."[3]

[1]States,Bert.O.*Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*. Berkeley University of California Press, 1985.154.Print.

[2]Johnson,Mark."Identity,Bodily Meaning and Art" *Art and Identity : Essays on the Aesthetic Creation ofMind*. Eds.Tone Roald and Johannes Lang. Rodopi, Amsterdam,NewYork,2013.15-16.Print.

[3]Ibid.,15-16.

In the context of contemporary literary research which encourages cross cultural and trans-disciplinary endeavours, the proposed study makes a humble attempt to forge a fruitful dialogue between theatrical studies and philosophy by bringing together eastern and western theatrical positions to showcase theatre as a place for deeper philosophical concerns.

Phenomenology, which is mainly concerned with exploring human reality as it appears to perception, furnishes a methodological framework for studying phenomena and perception within theatre praxis. Phenomenology which creates a way into various forms of experience is a practice rather than a dry intellectual abstract system and theatre may be looked upon as a concrete articulation of Phenomenology. Theatre is a dynamic space where the actor and spectator together collaboratively engage in the meaning making process.

Phenomenology is derived from the Greek word 'Phenomenon' means 'which appears', and logos means 'study'. It is the study of the structures of experience and consciousness.

Phenomenology, as a movement was inaugurated by Edmund Husserl (1859– 1938), in the Introduction to the Second Volume of the First Edition of his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901) as a new way of doing philosophy. Phenomenology became one of the strong philosophical currents at the onset of the twentieth century which revived our living contact with reality. It sought to reinvigorate philosophy by returning it to the life of the living human subject. Phenomenology is "a philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness".[4] Doroty Moran defines Phenomenology "as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which

[4]Phenomenology –The Free Dictionary. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*,Fourth Edition 2000. Web.15 Dec.2013.<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Phenomenology.com/>

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emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer."[5]As a philosophical and theoretical framework for the study of human experience Phenomenology for the first time provided an approach which denounced the subject – object dichotomy. Most of the philosophical currents, physical sciences and even medicine looked at perception, which is the means of experience as an objective process. Phenomenology introduced an approach which considered inner/subjective and the outer/objective experiences as part of the same process.

There have been several major figures who have contributed immensely in the development and growth of the philosophy of Phenomenology such as Franz Brentano(1838-1917),Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl(1859-1938),Martin Heidegger(1889-1976), Jean Paul-Sartre(1905-1980),Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Maurice Merleau-Ponty(1908-1961), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) et al. The proposed study endeavours to deal with Maurice Mearleu-Ponty's Phenomenological approach and analyze the selected plays of Indian Street Theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd within his conceptual framework.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (14March 1908- 3May 1961) was a French Phenomenological philosopher. He was highly influenced by Edmund Husserl who is considered as a father of Phenomenology and Martin Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty has written many works and his best known works are *The Structure of Behavior* (1942), *Phenomenology of Perception (*1945). His other work *The Visible and The Invisible* (1960) is an uncompleted work and it was posthumously published in 1964.

Maurice Mearleu-Ponty asserted that philosophy should reawaken an understanding of the original acts which would make men aware of the world. He writes "true philosophy

[5]Moran,Doroty. *Introduction to Phenomenology.* London and New York:Routledge,2000.4.Print.

consists in relearning to look at the world".[6] Philosophy will shed light on the "birth of being for us"[7].He further asserts that Phenomenology aims at "disclosure of the world" as its task is "to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason"[8]. He explains "philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but like art, the act of bringing truth into being."[9]He wanted to correct the concept of objective thought prevalent in modern science and psychology which ignored the subject of perception, and presented the world as already made. Opposing this notion, he asserted that philosophy must reawaken our immediate contact with the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology is the method of defining nature of our perceptual contact with the world. He states while explaining the intimate relation between the body and world that "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism; it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system".[10]

Perception is the background of experience which guides conscious action. The world is the field of perception and human consciousness gives meaning to the world. We cannot separate ourselves from our perception of the world. Perception is neither a mere sensation, nor an interpretation, rather consciousness is a process that includes sensing as well as reasoning. In his 1946 lecture, the Primacy of Perception, Merleau-Ponty explains further:

> By these words, "the primacy of perception", we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing human

[6]Merleau-Ponty,Maurice.*Phenomenology of Perception.*Trans.C.Smith.London:Routledge&Kegenpaul.1962.xx-xvi.Print.
[7]Ibid.,154.
[8]Ibid.,xx-xxi.
[9]Ibid.,xx-xv.
[10]Ibid.,203.

> knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality. This experience of rationality is lost when we take it for granted as self-evident, but is, on the contrary, rediscovered when it is made to appear against the background of non-human nature.[11]

Basically, Phenomenology studies the structures of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity.

Body, which he terms as 'flesh', is the main source of existence in the world as "it is the *body* that perceives"[12]. The body cannot be separated from the experience of the body. Though the mind and body each have their own being, the perceptions of the body influence what is perceived by the mind. There is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception.According to Merleau-Ponty there is immanence because the perceived object cannot be foreign to the person who perceives and there is transcendence because it always contains something more than what is given.

Merleau-Ponty's 'binocular vision' metaphor which conceives presence as a dynamic process of engagement with the world may be applied to theatre praxis as in theatre too 'objects of attention' are made complex and ambiguous. Theatre presents objects which exhibit a wide array of manifestations actual, fictional through sound, light, simulations, language, gestures, etc. In theatre also the objects can be constructed in numerous ways. Merleau-Ponty's concept of overlapping presences with reference to the relationship of consciousness to object may also be applied to theatre which showcases 'objects of attention' in terms of presentational possibilities.

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[11]Edie.James.ed.*The Primacy of Perception*.Evanston,IL:Northern University Press.1964.25.Print.
[12]Baldwin ,Thomas.ed.*Reading Merleau-Ponty:On Phenomenology of Perception*.New York:Routledge.2007.2.Print.

Theatre, perhaps more than any other medium, has the potential to present the world as complex multi-layered phenomenon which has to be perceived simultaneously, not just as a sum of different sensations. As Merleau-Ponty explains "we are involved in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world".[13]In theatre too the humour, suspense, anxiety, temporality of perceptual act spring from the tension between these overlapping modes of presentation.

For Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is first and foremost "a manner or style of thinking". He asserts that phenomenology finds its best expression not in historical and philosophical tracts but within human consciousness "we shall find in ourselves the true meaning of phenomenology"[14]. For Merleau- Ponty, the world is "lived" before it is known, and subjectivity is a constant process of interaction between world, body and consciousness, in which "world" is defined by our own particular "grasp" of objects and space. Theatre presents a beautiful overlap of fiction and actual. Theatre has immediacy, liveliness, simultaneity and a presence.

To depict theatre as a practical form of phenomenology, the proposed study would consider the plays of Samuel Beckett and Ionesco of Absurdist theatre and Indian street theatre playwrights Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi. The rationale behind selecting absurd plays and Indian street plays is that in both forms the playwrights employ body to communicate, thus enabling us study the relationship of the objects to bodies as they engage within one live space. The plays would be analyzed to investigate the ambiguous relationship between consciousness and the perceptual world, overlapping modes of presentation and the question of being, pre-reflective experience, relationship of an actor's body to his surroundings, interdependence of the world and the body etc.

[13]Merleau-Ponty,Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.*Trans.C.Smith.London:Routledge&Kegenpaul.1962.5. Print.
[14]Ibid.,viii.

The Theatre of the Absurd is a phrase taken from the Albert Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* written in 1942. The term 'Absurd', as Martin Esslin defines in his book *The Theatre of Absurd*, means 'out of harmony', in the musical context. Ionesco defined this term as:

> Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose ….cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.[15]

The Theatre of Absurd aims to express the futility of the human condition by the use of open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. The writers of the absurd theatre use symbolism and allegory as techniques. It disregards the traditional maxims as that of the basic unity and constancy of each character or the need for a plot. Absurd plays are characterized by lack of proper plot and proper characterization, action devoid of proper beginning, middle and end, incoherent dialogues etc.

The dramatists like Eugene Ionesco(1912-1994), Samuel Barclay Beckett(1906-1989), Jean Genet(1910-1986), Edward Albee(1928-2005) and Harold Pinter(1930-2008) used several new theatrical devices to depict the existential anguish and the sense of futility in the plays.

Samuel Beckett was an Irish dramatist and novelist. His masterpiece play, *Waiting for Godot*(1953) was originally written in French, and translated into English in 1956. *Waiting for Godot* follows two days in the lives of a pair of men who divert themselves while waiting expectantly for someone named Godot to arrive. They admit that they would not even recognize him if they were to see him. To occupy themselves, they eat, sleep, converse, argue, sing, play games, exercise, swap hats, and contemplate suicide — anything 'to hold

[15]Esslin,Martin.*The Theatre of the Absurd*. U.S.A.Penguin Books.1982.23.Print.

the terrible silence at bay.' They are alone in the beginning and are alone in the end, leaving one question before the spectators 'when will Godot come?'

Endgame (1957) is a claustrophobic interior which consists of one-act only. It also has symmetrical pairs like; we have in *Waiting for Godot*. Setting of the play is in a bare room with two small windows. A blind old man, Hamm, is sitting on the wheel chair. He is paralysed and he can no longer stand on his feet. His servant Clov, is unable to sit down. There are two other characters Nag and Nell who are the parents of Hamm. They are without legs.The world outside is dead for them. In *Endgame* also we are also certainly confronted with a very powerful expression of the sense of emptiness, of hopelessness, that is experienced in states of deep depression. The world becomes dead for such victims, but inside their minds there is ceaseless conflict.

In both the plays Beckett imaginatively recreates a complete miniature history of human self which is grotesquely true. The characters, representing dark distorted images of ourselves, symbolize reduced 'self-power'. The empty stage becomes a disintegrated cosmos which raises several questions related to self, conscious experience, identity. Stage in phenomenological terms becomes the "life World" which manifests various modes of consciousness.

Eugene Ionesco(1912- 1994) was a Rumanian dramatist. His famous one-act plays are *The Lesson*(1951), *The Chairs*(1952), and *The New Tenant*(1955).Some of his full length plays are *The Killer(*1959), *Rhinoceros(*1962),*Exit the King* (1963),*A Stroll in the Air (1962*) and *Thirst and Hunger* (1964).

Two plays of Ionesco would be analyzed through the lens of phenomenology. In *The Lesson* (1951), a timid professor 50-60 years old man, uses the meaning he assigns to words to establish tyrannical dominance over an eager female pupil. She is an eighteen years old student who has recently finished a science diploma and an Arts diploma. She is attending

sessions with the professor in pursuit of a total doctorate degree. She is very enthusiastic and eager at the beginning of the play but gradually becomes more passive as the lesson develops. Language plays the roles of hero and villain. Language has the metaphysical power in this play.

In *The Chairs (1952),* an elderly couple is sitting on the chair. They are static. They are waiting for the arrival of an audience to hear the old man's last message to posterity, but only empty chairs accumulate on stage. They have been married for seventy- five years and they gather together each night in their isolated house on a lonely island to pass the time by telling stories. Feeling confident that his message will be conveyed by an orator he has hired, the old man and his wife commit a double suicide.

Street theatre is a popular medium of communication in India. In Indian Street Plays are known as "*Nukkad Natak".* Street plays or the Indian "*Nukkad Natak",* are used to spread social and political messages in India. Unlike proscenium theatre, Street theatre uses minimum use of lights, cosmetics, costumes and other techniques. The actor communicates with varying tones of his voice, his body language and maintains eye-to-eye contact with the audience. Street plays are episodic in structure and combine music, song and dance.

In India, Badal Sircar(15 July 1925 – 13 May 2011) and Safdar Hashmi(12 April 1954 – 2 January 1989) are leading street theatre playwrights. *Nukkad Natak* was revived in the 1970s and now they are popular all over the country.Badal Sircar is widely known for the establishment of the 'Third Theatre'. He also established his theatre group '*Satabdi*'. Sircar always felt that in proscenium theatre there was a wide gap between the spectators and actors. 'The Third theatre', being flexible and portable can reach the illiterate villagers and poor people.

In the Third Theatre, the most important thing is that body is the only vehicle to convey the message of play to audience. He realized that while cinema was a popular

medium and could show much more than theatre, it lacked one fundamental element that was essential to the theatre—'liveness'. He explains:

> Communication is essential in every art form; the artist communicates to other people through literature, music, painting, acting. But the methods of communication are different. A writer writes—he does not have to be present when his writing is being read. So it is with the painter and the sculptor. In cinema, the film artists do not have to be present when the film is being projected. But in the theatre, the performers have to be present when the communication takes place. This is a fundamental difference. Theatre is a live show, cinema is not. In theatre, communication is direct; in cinema it is through images.[16]

Direct communication is the cardinal feature of the 'Third Theatre'. As he puts his words as:

> Theatre can show very little, but whatever it can show is here, now. The Performers and the spectators come to the same place, on the same day, at the same time; otherwise the event of theatre will not happen [...] that is the strength. That should be emphasized.[17]

This new theatre depended entirely on acting—the performer's body on the one hand, and the spectator's imagination on the other. As only human presence was to be emphasized, the other paraphernalia of the theatre became superfluous. Elaborate sets were no longer possible.

Badal Sircar's*Sagina Mahato* (1970) was the first play to be performed on the concept of the Third theatre. His other plays like *Spartacus* (1973), *Abu Hossain* (1971), *Procession*(1974),*Bhoma*(1976), and *Stale News*(1979) are also based on this concept of his

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[16]Sircar,Badal. "The Third Theatre" *On Theatre.*Calcutta:Seagull Books.2009. .As Quoted in Swati Bhise"BadalSircar's Third Theatre:Feature and Functions".*Galaxy International Multidisciplinary Reseach Journal.2.* 6 March 2013.Web.25Feb.2014.<http://www.galaxyimrj.com.>

[17]Sircar,Badal. "Voyages in the Theatre :IVShri Ram Memorial Lecture." *On Theatre.Calcutta :Seagull Books,2009.*As Quoted inSwatiBhise."Badalsircar's Third Theatre:Feature and Functions".*Galaxy International Multidisciplinary Reseach Journal.3.* 6March2013. Web.25Feb.2014<http://www.galaxyimrj.com.>

theatre. He was influenced by Indian folk theatre forms like; *Jatra, Tamasha, Bhawai, Nautanki* and *Kathakali, Chhau* and *Manipuri* dances. He took very much for his Third Theatre from these folk theatre forms.It is impossible to discuss the history of modern Indian Theatre without the name of Badal Sircar. Badal Sircar is a renowned first-generation Bengali dramatist of Post- Colonial India.

The play *Procession* was first staged by Sircar's playgroup '*Satabdi*' in 1974. It describes the adverse effects of colonial rule on Indian people. The play is the story about the unnoticed disappearance of young men in an anonymous urban landscape. Victims of police violence and state oppression, the mysteriously disappeared can neither be traced nor acknowledged as lost. Procession for food and clothes, procession for salvation, for the revolution, for protest and festive processions are daily occurrences for the people of Calcutta. Sircar has dealt with the multiple themes in the play but there is no proper story element and neither of the themes is in continuation. The divide and rule strategy of colonialists resulted in the confrontation, communal riots, and the partition of the country is one of the themes referred by the dramatist.

Badal Sircar's actors and actresses appear in everyday clothes, with a tag on the back identifying the characters. There are no embellishments, decorations and heavy costumes in the play.

The play *Bhoma*,was first produced in the 1976. The aim of the play *Bhoma*, is to communicate about the happening in the villages at the grass- roots level, the nature of exploitation both industrial and agricultural, the urban stranglehold on the rural economy. Bhoma is a character in the play who represents the condition of the subaltern people. Bhoma interprets the exploitation of the subaltern class by representing the nature of commercialization of agriculture and by the introduction of the group of money-lenders during British rule. Subaltern is a group of society which does not have access to power.

Safdar Hashmi was a playwright, lyricist, actor, teacher, member of communist party of India and a Journalist also. He was the founder member of the Jana Natya Manch (Janam)

which was formed in 1973. His main aim was to "take theatre to the people".[18] The real purpose of his Jana Natya Manch was "to use theatre as a tool to equip the working classes and all people involved in the struggle to realize the vision of a socialist tomorrow, with an art which would entertain and analyse the world around them"[19].

Machine (1978) is a play on the recent incident of repression of workers by the owners of a factory. This play is a sharp analysis and critique of capitalist class. It is the first short play of Jana Natya Manch. In the play '*Machine*' symbolizes the structures of interdependence and domination which sustains the capitalist order. In the play, he has used the bodies of the actors and voices to create the machine.

Hallabol! (Attack, December 1988) was performed by the Jana Natya Manch on the morning of a New Year 1 January, 1989. This play was written and performed in support of the worker's demands led by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). It is also about the government's role in the suppression of the workers from the economic struggle. During the performance of the play, Safdar Hashmi was attacked and murdered by the congress workers with guns and arms. This led to the death of Safdar Hashmi on January 2, 1989 at the age of 34.

The study proposes to demonstrate that theatre and phenomenology are linked to each other as they both cast the familiar in an unfamiliar way. Theatre is not a simple presentation of plays and characters but it represents the world which we inhabit and phenomenology examines the way we as subjects in the world perceive phenomena in time and space.

Though phenomenology has been taken up theatre theorists as a methodology for analyzing the materiality of the theatre, literature review reveals that most of the researches have focused primarily on the experience of the spectator in perceiving theatre. Bruce Wilshire propounded the concept of 'life is theatre like' and explored the experience of watching in his famous work *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor*

[18]Ghosh,Arjun. *A History of the Jana NatyaManch: Plays for the People*.NewDelhi.Sage Publication.2012.7.Print.
[19]Ibid.,7.

(1982). Similar to Wilshire, Bert O States's book, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On Phenomenology of Theatre* (1985) deals with plays and their reception. Stanton B. Garner Jr. in his book *Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (1994) takes an approach similar to States and proposes a dialogue between phenomenological investigation and semiotics and poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories.

While Garner's analysis focuses on the visible aspects of theatre,AliceRayner's*Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre*(2006) explores phenomenology in conjunction with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Amelia Jones in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) examines body art through phenomenology. Phillip B.Zarrilli in his article "Toward A Phenomenological Model of the Actor's Embodied Modes of Experience"(December 2004),has analysed the concept of 'body' with reference to Merleau -Ponty's phenomenology of perception but it presents a simple theoretical discussion covering some aspects. Lance St.John Butler in his book *Samuel Beckett and the Meaning of Being: A Study in Ontological Parable* (1984) presents a study of Beckett with reference to Heidegger's Being and Time and Hegel's Phenomenology of mind. Maurice Valency in the book *The End of the World: An Introduction to Contemporary Drama* (1980) has analysed the Theatre of Absurd with reference to Beckett's plays and Ionesco's plays. EnochBrater's book *Beckett At 80/Beckett in Content* (1986) presents the detailed study of Beckett's plays. Apart from these seminal contributions in the sphere of theatre studies and phenomenology, Samuel Beckett and Ionesco have been analysed by researchers from thematic and stylistic perspectives but not from Maurice Merleau- Ponty's Phenomenological perspective.

Similarly Indian Street Theatre and the study of Third Theatre of Badal Sircar have captured the attention of many researchers and critics but the survey reveals that they focus on the postcolonial elements, techniques of street theatre, folk theatre, major socio-cultural issues etc, but Indian street plays have not been situated within the phenomenological framework of Maurice Merleau –Ponty.

The proposed study marks a point of departure from the above mentioned seminal research contributions in the realm of phenomenological research in theatre as it would add new dimensions to the current ongoing phenomenological research and theatre. It would provide an analysis of the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi within Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological framework. With concrete supportive illustrations from the selected plays, the study would attempt to provide an in depth exploration of the main concepts of Maurice Mearleu-Ponty's Phenomenology such as 'binocular vision, overlapping of various modes of presentation, pre reflective experience, dynamic relationship between consciousness and perception, life world crises, embodied and perceptual experience, relationship between an actor's body to the elements of time and space, the actor-spectator relationship'. Such a study would not only provide a new interpretative framework to the theatre of absurd and Indian street theatre but would also bring together two different literary traditions of west and east ,thus also making it a cross cultural study.

The objectives of the proposed study would be:

1. To analyze the close relation between Phenomenology and theatre.
2. To explore in detail Maurice Mearleu-Ponty's Phenomenology and its applicability in theatre studies.
3. To analyze the selected plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi within Merleau- Ponty's Phenomenological framework.
4. To draw parallels and contrasts between the Theatre of the Absurd and Indian Street Theatre to bring out some universals underlying two different literary currents.

Keeping in view the above objectives the tentative chapter scheme of the proposed study would be as follows:

CHAPTER I- Theatre and Phenomenology: An Introduction

(a) Historical Perspective of Theatre- The Theatre of the Absurd and the Street Theatre

(b) Phenomenology- Introduction and Historical Perspective

(c) Literature Review of Phenomenological Research and Theatre Studies.

CHAPTER II – Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Phenomenology: An Overview.

CHAPTER III - Perception, Consciousness and Being: A Study of the Theatre of the Absurd.

CHAPTER IV- Indian Street Theatre: A Phenomenological Approach.

CHAPTER V- Theatre of the Absurd and Indian Street Theatre: A Comparative Perspective.

CHAPTER VI- Conclusion.

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